Baroque Diminution

ROYAL COLLEGE OF MUSIC London

The Baroque musical marketplace is too complex to fully summarise and profoundly different from those of the 19th and 20th Centuries. Music was created in clearly distinct forms for different scopes (i.e. court and household music, church music, opera, folk music, etc.), and for different audiences. Instrumental music was mainly performed in courts (and later in semi-public halls) either by renowned musicians who toured around Europe as 'guest artists,' or by court musicians who had the status of servants.

Who we consider to have been the great instrumental 'composers' of that time were often internationally renowned virtuosi. Their music was appreciated firstly because their ability as virtuosi—and by extension 'improvisers'—was in great demand amongst courts and halls. Not dissimilarly from jazz musicians, they would mostly perform their own music, which was a mere means to showcase virtuosity. When borrowing music composed by other performers, instead, they had the right (or even the duty) to modify it by integrating personal improvised embellishments and variations (called 'diminutions').

If performers played their own repertoire, **for whom was instrumental music printed?**

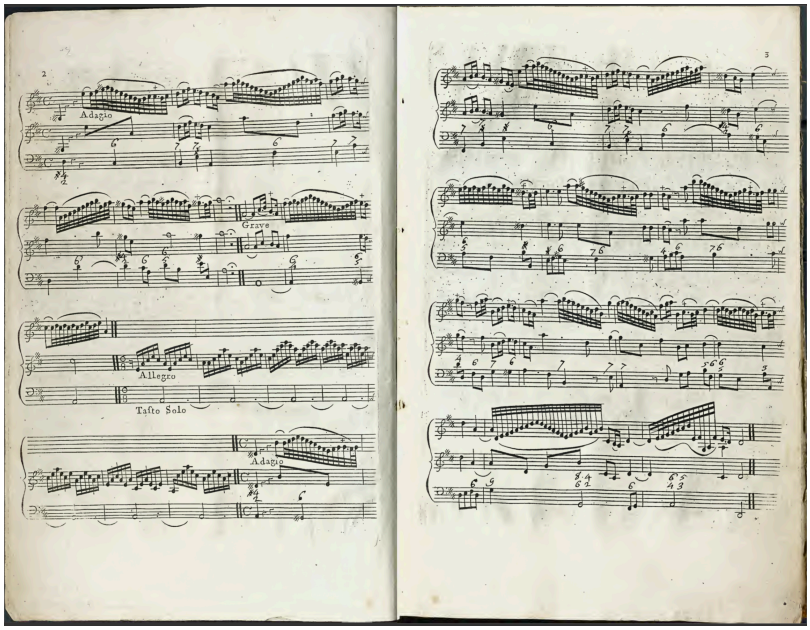
Printed instrumental (chamber and solo) music was generally targeted to a wide market of connoisseurs. When a soloist became famous, connoisseurs would want to buy their compositions, either to be able to perform in the style of a favourite artist, or because that was the main way to get acquainted with the music of a celebrated musician who would not necessarily tour in their area (recordings did not exist).

Because published scores were for a specific type of customer, they could not be exact transcriptions of the dazzling virtuosities performed on stage; especially if the soloists were improvising ornamentations extemporarily (without a fixed pattern). Published scores were skeletal (reduced) versions of pieces improvised or performed by the composers—improvised embellishments and diminutions were implied (or suggested, hence the popularity of the theme and variations genre).

An emblematic example is **Arcangelo Corelli**: one of the most revered mid-Baroque violinists. From his arguably vast production of performed music, he only published 5 collections of Duo and Trio Sonatas during his lifetime (the Concerti Grossi Op.6 were published posthumously). All these published sonatas present simple, undecorated melodies that do not live up to Corelli's reputation as one of the greatest violinists of his time.

Corelli's Op.5

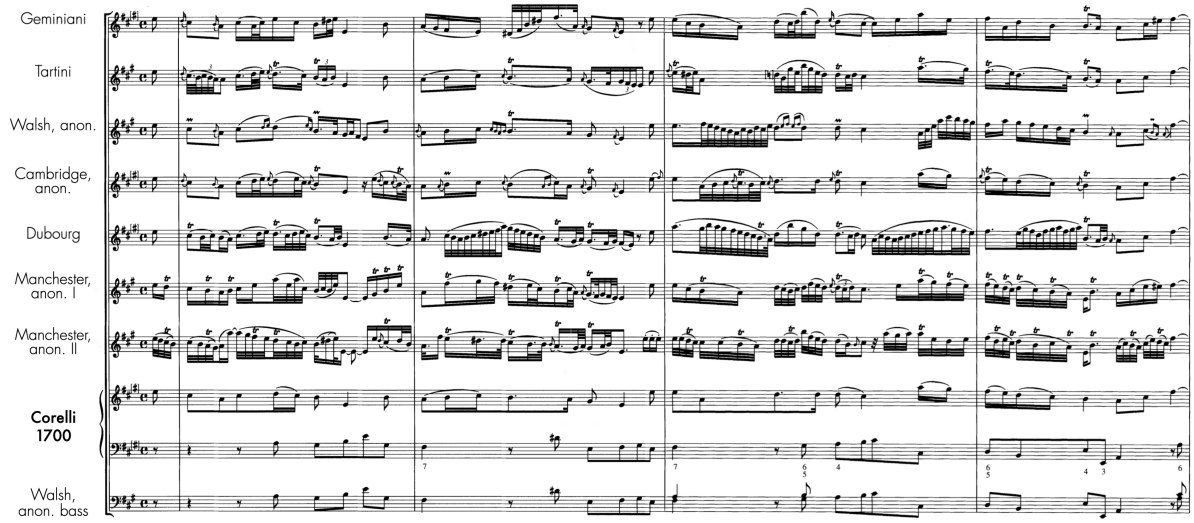
Op.5 is an interesting case study: this set of 12 sonatas for violin and continuo were internationally very successful and became a standard for many virtuoso violinists for the rest of the Baroque period. Similarly to all his other opuses, Corelli published only a skeletal version (1700); in 1710, however, Dutch publisher Estienne Roger printed an edition containing diminutions allegedly suggested by Corelli himself. On the left, a reprint of that edition by London publisher Walsh allows you to compare the alleged diminutions (in the top stave) with the skeletal version originally published (in the middle stave—the lower contains the figured bass). The authenticity of the diminutions is not certain, but the success of this edition suggests that they were at least plausible. You can use this edition as a reference for Baroque lavish decorations.

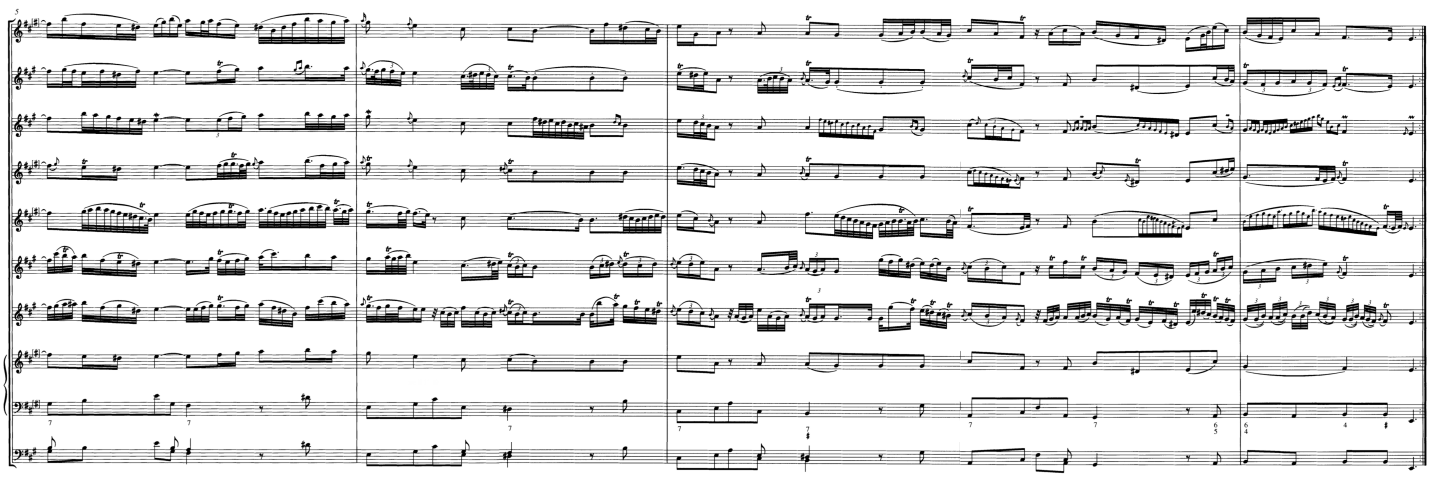


A public domain transcription of the Roger edition is available **here**. When you study this document, you should keep in mind that, if authentic at all, these decorations imply a great level of rhythmical flexibility and are to be seen as an approximation of what was played, which does not take into consideration the richness in nuances and timbral changes that a masterful violinist should make. Because music notation can describe mostly pitch and rhythm (even these, only partially), we can assume that a series of other modulations in sound were part of interpretation even if they could not be transcribed into notation.

(!) There is no reason to think that the great virtuosi of the past had no taste for the exploration of extended techniques (e.g. extreme 'sul ponticello' or 'sul tasto' sounds for strings, microtonal pitch-bend and glissandi, or various noises produced by the instrument)—these were non-notated elements that could have been an integral part of performance practice, reflecting the love for 'affections' and 'effects' characteristic of Baroque aesthetics.

As mentioned above, Op.5 became so famous that it was used as a standard (another similarity with jazz, see below) for other virtuosi, who in turn published transcriptions of their own diminutions (as today we appreciate transcriptions of famous jazz solos). Amongst them are Francesco Geminiani, one of Corelli's students; Matthew Dubourg, Geminiani's student in London; and Giuseppe Tartini, another celebrated virtuoso and pedagogue of the time. In this comparative score made by scholar Neal Zaslaw in his article 'Ornaments for Corelli's Violin Sonatas, op.5' (Oxford University Press, 1996), you can compare the diminutions suggested by the three aforementioned violinists, as well as other examples composed by anonymous violinists found in various manuscript collections in Cambridge, Manchester and London (Walsh). Studying these diminutions, you can notice how opulent such ornamentation used to be. A taste for continuous variety and asymmetry comes through as well. Furthermore, you can notice that these decorations are largely diatonic: the taste for chromaticism will appear in the Classical style.



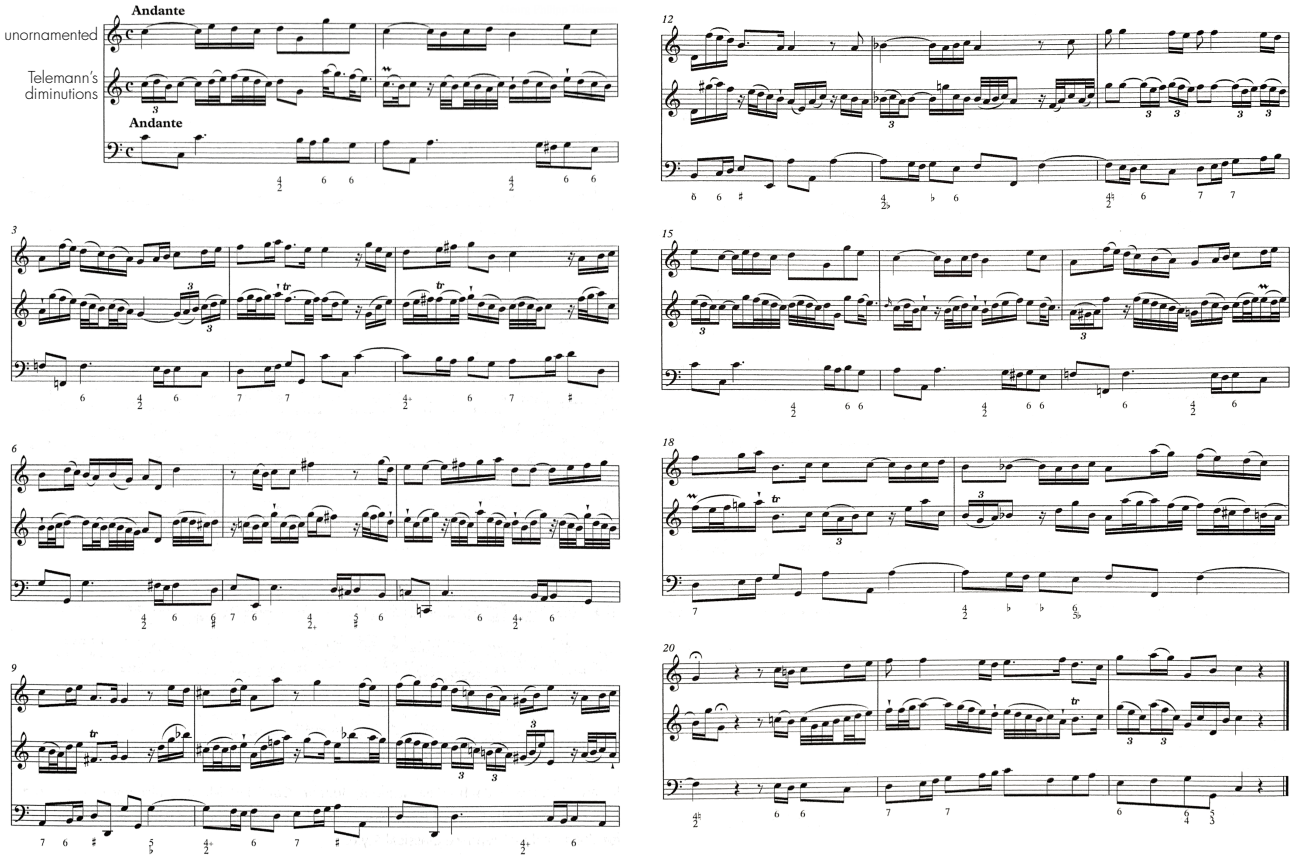


Since the year of publication of this comparative score (Zaslaw, 1996), further historical sources that show the broad appreciation of Corelli's Op.5 were discovered, such as other manuscripts with diminutions on Corelli's original music by successful soloists. This draws a significant parallelism with jazz, where standard pieces like Autumn Leaves are staples performed by every jazz musician as a recognisable and comparable canvas upon which they can showcase their invention with improvised variations. This seems to be very similar to Baroque solo practice.

In his book 'Harpsichord and Lute Music in 17th-Century France' (London: MacMillan Press, 1987), musicologist David Ledbetter gives a similar account of popular dance music pieces (mostly Minuets, Allemande, Sarabande, etc.) originally composed for lute and further arranged for harpsichord (with various degrees of variation, from subtle to noticeable) by celebrated harpsichordists. (The book is available in the RCM Library.)

Late-Baroque examples

Georg Philipp Telemann is a good source of ornamentation examples. As he was a popular composer for household music (Tafelmusik = music made for the 'table,' to be played in the household), he occasionally published music with both unornamented melodies and suggested diminutions, as in the example below from his Methodical Sonata in C major TWV 41:C3 (1732).



Similar examples keep being discovered in historical manuscripts. The same trend can be observed in the whole Baroque period (from Monteverdi to Bach, 1600-1750); the scope of this document is obviously not to give a comprehensive account on Baroque Diminutions, but to open the door to your personal research into the numerous sources available (also in the RCM Library). The way we perform today is likely still very different to what was done in past centuries (including Historical Performance, which is a discipline that continues to evolve thanks to thorough ongoing research). There is no ambition to pass onto you a set of rules (or absolute truths) on 'how to accurately perform in specific styles'—real performance practice needs to mediate the knowledge of the past with the taste and needs of today's audiences. You should use the information gathered in this module as historical evidence for a different practice, and to approach the ever-changing art of interpretation with a conscious, open mind.

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